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Report on the Second Stage Archaeological Investigation Conducted in the Courtyard of Ateni Sioni Church

Issuing Authority for the Archaeological Permit:	National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation of Georgia
Holder of the Archaeological Permit:	Leyerko LLC (ID No. 405721713)
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Introduction

Ateni Sioni is located in the village of Ateni, within the Gori Municipality, on the northern slopes of the Trialeti Range, in the valley of the Tana River. The Tana Valley represented one of the shortest routes connecting Shida Kartli with Kldekari and Tori. Therefore, the urban development of Ateni was largely conditioned by the strategic significance of this route.

The church is a cross-domed structure of the Jvari type, constructed on a specially built substructure on the left bank of the river. According to the numerous palaeographic inscriptions preserved on the monument, its construction should be dated to the second half of the seventh century CE (654–689) and is associated with representatives of one branch of the Bagratid family — Varaz Mamphali and his son Nerse Eristavi.

Archaeological excavations conducted around the church during restoration works demonstrated that the monument was erected upon the remains of an earlier fifth–sixth century church. On the basis of a Syriac epistolary source, the art historian and principal researcher of the monument, Guram Abramishvili, suggested that Ateni Sioni already functioned as an episcopal centre in the sixth century. This interpretation is further supported by a ninth-century *nuskhuri* inscription executed on the southern slope of the apse, which mentions the Bishop of Ateni.

Georgian and Armenian inscriptions and reliefs preserved on the façades and within the interior of the church indicate that, in 946 CE, a defensive wall was constructed around Ateni through the patronage and order of Mikhael Baghvashi, to whom the Ateni Valley had been granted by the Georgian king Bagrat I in 940. The restoration of Ateni Sioni itself also appears to have commenced under Mikhael Baghvashi and was completed between 983–986 CE by his son Rati I Baghvashi under the supervision of the architect Todosaki.

The church was painted shortly after its construction in the late seventh century. Surviving fragments indicate that the earliest wall paintings were predominantly aniconic in character. During the eleventh century, the renovated church was repainted entirely.

A further phase of restoration activity appears to have taken place during the thirteenth–fourteenth centuries. Evidence for this includes the addition of an angel relief above the depiction of Rati I Baghvashi, stylistically attributable to this period, as well as the construction of a side chapel attached to the southern portico of the church, fragments of which survive today.

Scholarly investigation of the artistic, architectural, and historical aspects of Ateni Sioni began in the nineteenth century and continues to the present day. In recent decades, these studies have been synthesized in the monograph *Ateni Sioni* by Guram Abramishvili, in which the author reassessed the construction history, stylistic development, and painted decoration of the monument. His conclusions and chronological framework are now widely accepted within scholarship.

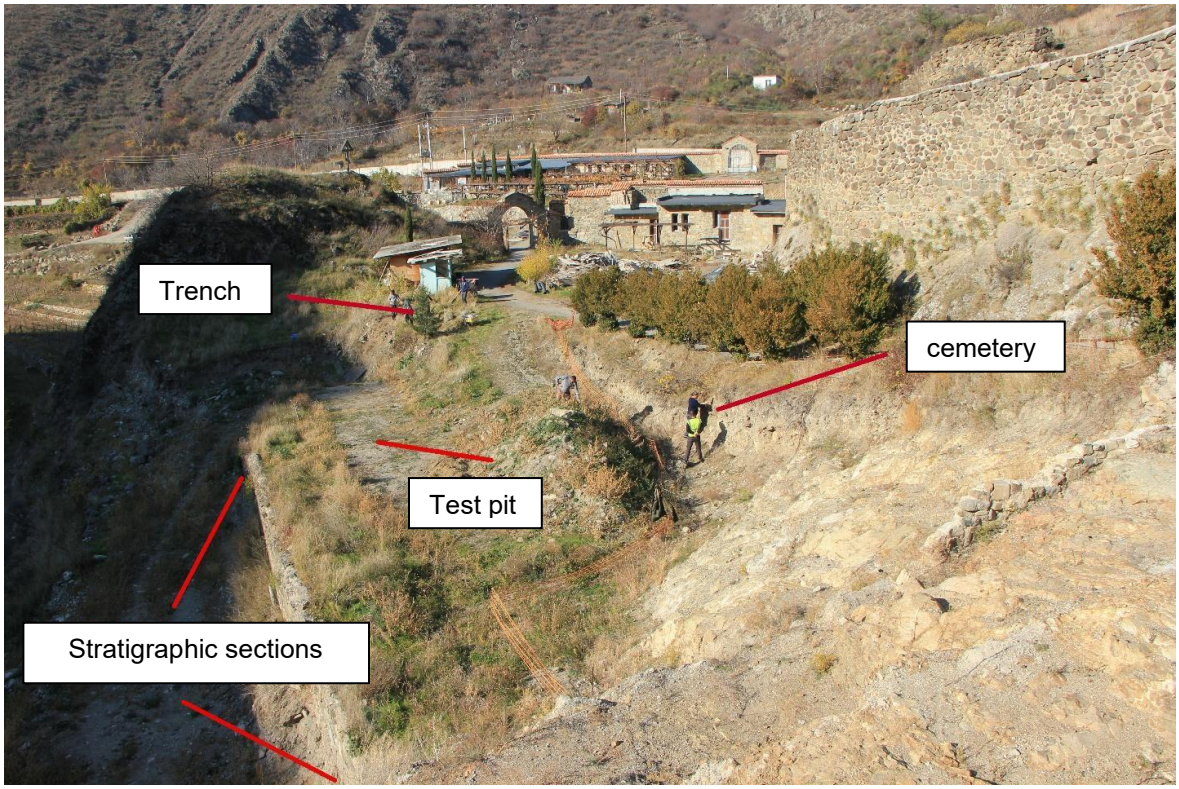
Guram Abramishvili was also responsible for initiating archaeological excavations at Ateni Sioni. Under his direction, archaeological investigations conducted between 1969 and 1992 examined the area of the church substructure as well as the northern and southern perimeters of the monument. These excavations revealed that, prior to the construction of the seventh-century church, another building had stood upon the substructure, interpreted by the excavator as a basilica. A clay sarcophagus was also discovered, representing a typical example of fourth–fifth century clay sarcophagi. In addition, High and Late Medieval burials were identified around the church, some of which had disturbed the remains of earlier architectural structures.

Report on the works conducted at the site

Since 2020, the construction of infrastructure necessary for the monastic functioning of Ateni Sioni has been initiated. The project envisaged the construction of monastic cells, a shop, and additional auxiliary structures. To the west of the church, where the original access path to the monument is located and where a pedestrian bridge over the Tana River has already been constructed, a visitor arriving from the historic route is intended to access the church complex. Within this area, the construction of a shop and a museum dedicated to the history of the church is planned.

As part of this project, the upper artificial fill layer was removed from terraces previously used for plantations along the bank of the Tana River. Beneath this fill layer, an archaeological deposit was disocvered. In addition, weather conditions caused both soil erosion and localized collapses of the eroded deposits, during which several burials became exposed. Therefore, it became necessary to initiate archaeological rescue and survey excavations.

Ateni Sioni church. Aerial photo



West section of the church garden – project area

A) The Cemetery

The exposed burials belong to the same cemetery partially investigated under the direction of Guram Abramishvili. The graves are located on the southern side of the sloping path leading toward the church and partially extend into the path itself.

A total of four graves were visible in the exposed section. Three of them were situated on the lower level and aligned consecutively along a west–east axis, while a fourth grave was positioned above Burial N1. The upper grave represented a simple pit burial, whereas the remaining three were stone-cist burials. Of the exposed burials, only the south-eastern corner of the easternmost grave was visible, while the others had been damaged to varying degrees.

The lower-level burials were constructed directly on the natural ground surface, which served as the grave floor. The graves were individual inhumations. Burials N1 and N2 contained adult

individuals interred with their heads oriented westward. Burial N3, which remained largely intact and only partially exposed, was not excavated. The upper burial contained the remains of an infant.

Since the complete excavation of the burials could have caused further collapse of the adjacent pathway, Burial N4 was fully excavated, while Burials N1 and N2 were only partially exposed, and Burial N3 remained unopened. Following documentation, the graves were reburied and conserved. However, in order to prevent future damage to the burials and further erosion of the pathway, it is considered necessary to construct a protective retaining wall along the exposed section.

The section of the cemetery

Burial N4

Burial N1

Burial N2

Near Burial N2, a fragment consisting of the rim and neck of a light straw-coloured fired jug was discovered. The vessel features a wide cylindrical neck with a double-ridged profile and an outward-folded flat rim. Ribbed-neck jugs first appear within Kartlian ceramic traditions during the Late Roman period (3rd-4th centuries AD) and become widespread throughout the same period and the Early Middle Ages (5th-8th centuries). Both single-ridged and double-ridged examples are known. In later periods, particularly during the High Medieval era (9th-13th centuries), such vessels become less common, especially those with double ridges. Accordingly, the fragment discovered at Ateni more closely resembles Early Medieval ribbed-neck vessels, although the distinctly Medieval form of the rim suggests a somewhat later date. It may therefore be attributed to a transitional period. On this basis, the cemetery itself should most likely be dated to the High Medieval period.

Fragment of a ribbed-neck jug discovered near Burial N2.

B) Test pit

As noted above, the construction of a shop and museum is planned on the terrace west of the church. The structure is intended to be semi-subterranean in character, requiring the terrace to be entirely cut into the ground surface. In order to clarify the relationship between the artificial fill deposits and the underlying archaeological deposits, a test pit measuring 3 × 1.5 m was excavated in the central part of the terrace.

The section of the test pit demonstrated that the soil deposits down to a depth of 1.9 m consisted of artificial fill, while an archaeological deposit began at approximately 2 m below the present surface. Ceramic fragments belonging to various chronological periods were recovered from this layer. Some consisted of High and Late Medieval pottery, while others represented Early Medieval and transitional Late Antique–Early Medieval roof tiles, including fragments coated with red slip. Thus, according to the evidence from the test pit, the archaeological deposit begins at a depth of approximately 2 m. The same stratigraphic pattern was identified in Stratigraphic Section N2, located south-west of the pit, where the archaeological deposit was likewise recorded at a depth of approximately 2 m beneath the retaining wall of the present terrace (see below).

Location of the test pit in the courtyard terrace

Test pit

Ceramic fragments discovered in the test pit

C) Stratigraphic Sections

As part of the project, the western and eastern sections of the southern façade of the retaining wall supporting the artificial terrace between the pathway and the Tana River were cleaned and examined stratigraphically. The cleaning of the wall and the exposed stratigraphic sections provided the following information:

In Section N1 (eastern section), two walls of different periods and construction techniques were identified, both showing evidence of later repairs. The lower wall (height: 1 m) was founded almost directly on the bedrock substrate. Originally, it had been constructed of horizontally laid roughly worked stones of varying sizes bonded with mortar. During a later restoration phase, larger stones of differing shapes were added onto the original masonry. Above the remains of this wall lay an approximately 30 cm thick deposit layer, upon which the upper wall had been constructed.

The upper wall itself consisted of two phases: the lower portion, approximately 90 cm in height, built from fieldstones of varying size set in lime mortar; and an upper extension approximately 60 cm high continuing the same masonry line.

Section N2 (western section) was cleaned in an area where erosion beneath the terrace retaining wall had already exposed the cultural deposits. Following cleaning, a substantial archaeological deposit became visible, within the middle part of which a thick lime-plaster floor (?) was identified extending deeper beneath the terrace deposits.

Stratigraphic section N1

Stratigraphic Section N2

D) Trench

The main focus of the archaeological works was the eroded section at the western edge of the terrace, where a destruction layer and a qvevri were visible. The trench measured 20 sq. m (5 × 4 m) and reached a depth of 3.2 m. In order to prevent collapse of the trench walls due to the depth, small stepped terraces were left along the northern side at intervals of 70–100 cm.

Beneath the turf and humus layer, a fill deposit averaging 45–50 cm in thickness was cleaned. Within this layer, together with basalt rubble stones, a basalt architectural element resembling a lorphini was discovered (although it is unlikely to have been a true lorphini due to its excessive thickness and coarse workmanship). In the same layer, at the western edge of the trench, a small *qvevri* vessel (*Kotso*) was found embedded in the ground. According to a local woman, during her youth (second half of the 20th century) it had been used for storing *zedashe* wine.

Trench area before the commencement of excavations

After removal of the fill layer, at a depth of 1.4 m below the present ground surface, a compacted earthen floor was reached, clearly bearing traces of burning caused by fire. Fragments of wooden beams were also recorded. The outlines of the structure became clearly visible through the remains of the southern wall (Wall N1, maximum preserved height 20 cm) and the eastern wall (Wall N2, maximum preserved height 90 cm). Walls N1 and N2, or rather their remains, were constructed of rubble and river stones bonded with mud mortar and joined one another in a semicircular form. At this stage it is difficult to determine the exact function of the structure, since part of it extends into the unexcavated area, making a full reconstruction impossible. However, the thinness of the walls suggests that it was probably an auxiliary building.

The first – dumped deposit (destruction layer) identified in the trench

The first – dumped deposit (destruction layer) and a *qvevri (Kotso)* identified in the trench

The upper structure uncovered in the trench

The upper structure uncovered in the trench

The southern wall of the structure (Wall N1) was found to have been built directly upon an earlier wall (Wall N3), oriented northwest–southeast (length: 2 m) and continuing westward into the unexcavated area. This wall was built of horizontally laid rubble stones bonded with mud mortar and survives to a height of 70 cm. In turn, this wall partially rested upon an even earlier wall (Wall N4), of which only a small fragment was exposed in the western section of the trench. Wall N3 must have represented the northern wall of a building, since immediately south of it a compacted clay floor was identified, into which both a *qvevri* and a tandoor (oven) had been set.

The qvevri was made of relatively well-levigated clay, fired to a pinkish color, and decorated with relief bands running around the body, including a twisted ridge around the shoulder. Its rim was triangular in shape. As noted above, the *qvevri* had been set into lime mortar, a feature characteristic of the High Medieval period. Approximately 1.4 m east of it, a tandoor with a double wall was discovered, partially embedded into the floor. It was filled with destruction debris, within which were found a plain flat-bottomed bowl and fragments of a plate made of well-levigated clay and fired to a pale straw color. The southern part of the tandoor had collapsed, while the eastern side extended into the unexcavated area; therefore, the oven was not completely cleared.

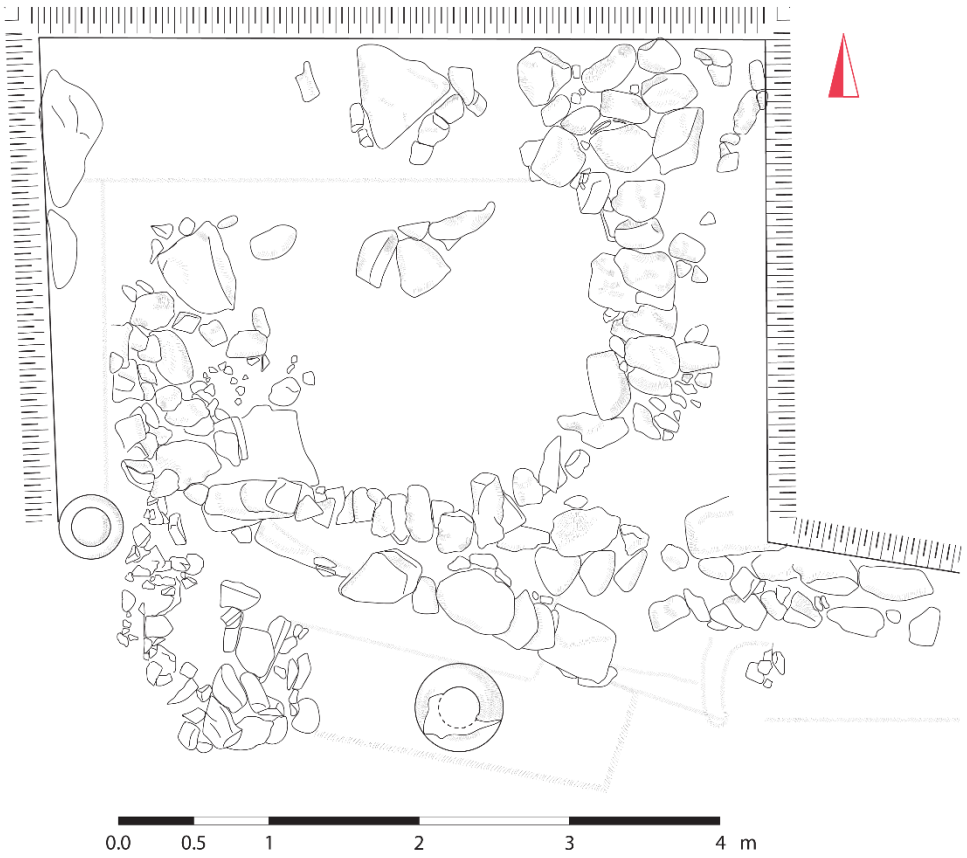
The stratigraphic relationship between the structures uncovered in the trench.

Stratigraphic section of the trench

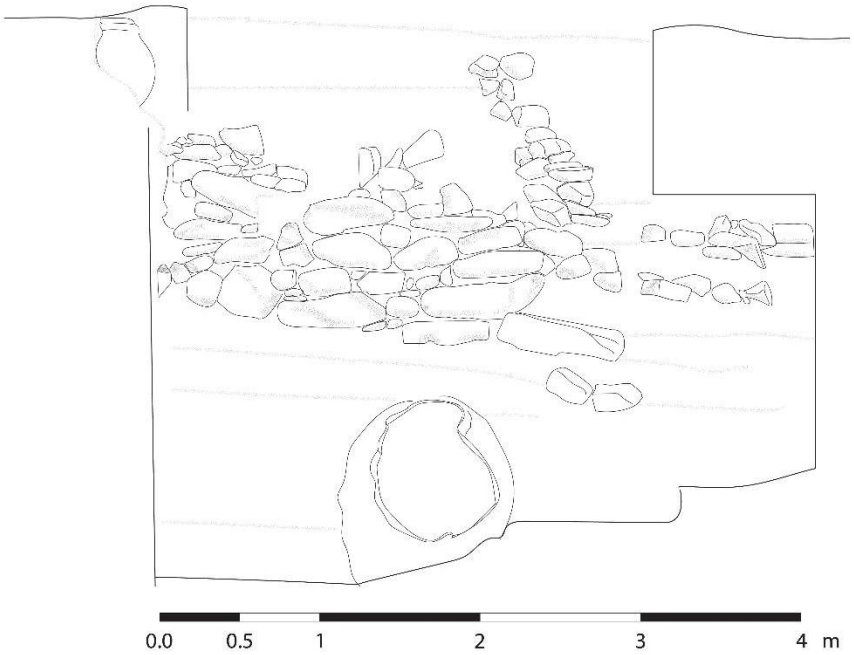
Auxiliary building (storage building) uncovered in the trench

Both the qvevri and the oven had been installed within a 1 m-thick destruction layer, beneath which carbonized fragments of wooden beams were recorded in the southwestern corner of the trench. Since at this point an even earlier archaeological deposit began to emerge, the investigation of which would have required a significantly larger excavation area and additional time, further deepening was suspended.

Thus, within this 20 sq. m trench, five archaeological deposits were identified. At present, little can be said about the earliest first and second deposits due to insufficient excavation. The third layer represents an auxiliary structure containing a qvevri and an oven (tandoor, in Georgian - *თონე*); the fourth archaeological deposit is represented by the remains of a rounded-corner structure; while the fifth consists of the latest destruction layer and a small *qvevri* embedded within it.



Plan of the Trench



Section of the trench

The material recovered during the cleaning of both the auxiliary building and the subsequently constructed rounded-corner structure consisted exclusively of ceramics. Most of the finds were vessel fragments, while roof tiles and water-pipe fragments occurred only sporadically. It should be noted that the ceramics from both levels are characteristic of the High Medieval period (9th-13th centuries). Particularly noteworthy are the glazed bowls discovered in both levels, including fragments coated with white slip and covered with yellow and green glaze; bowls decorated with incised ornamentation beneath a white slip and covered with turquoise glaze; fragments of a salt-cellar with burgundy glaze; and fragments of polychrome glazed bowls. All these types date to the 11th–13th centuries and are commonly found in large quantities at settlements of this period.

Among the ceramic assemblage, special attention should be paid to the thin-walled, well-levigated vessels fired to a pale straw color and painted with red and black pigments. Similar ceramics are well known from 12th–13th century sites in eastern Georgia.

Particularly significant is a fragment of the rim and handle of a jug discovered within the upper-level structure. It was made of well-levigated clay, fired to a pale reddish-brown color, and had a flat cross-section. The handle originated directly from the rim and most likely extended down to the vessel's shoulder, as is common with such jugs. At the upper part of the handle, three

Asomtavruli letters , “Ⴑ”, “Ⴆ”, and “Ⴋ”, were carefully incised in ligature form, reading “Basili.” The inscription was deciphered by the paleographer Nikoloz Zhghenti, who dated it paleographically to the 12th century.

As mentioned above, both grooved and flat roof-tile fragments occurred sporadically within the ceramic assemblage. One fragment of a grooved tile was coated with red slip, indicating a date no later than the Early Medieval period. Its presence within High Medieval layers remains unexplained at this stage. Considering that the church itself was roofed with stone slabs (*lorphini*), while roof tiles were discovered not only during our excavation but also during the excavations conducted under the direction of Guram Abramishvili, it may be assumed that the 5th–6th century church was roofed with tiles, whereas in later periods such tiles were reused mainly for auxiliary structures.

Of particular interest in this regard is an antefix revealed nearby as a result of soil erosion. The object is poorly preserved. It was made of coarse-grained clay and fired red. It represented the terminal inserted into a grooved roof tile, with a semicircular front plate. The plate bears a cross with dot-ended equal-sized arms impressed with a flat-edged tool. Compared to the refined workmanship characteristic of Georgian antefixes in general, the Ateni example appears relatively crude. It is likely that it too belonged to the roofing system of an auxiliary structure.

Material recovered from the upper destruction layer of the trench

Material recovered from the collapse layer of the upper structure.

Material recovered from the lower structure and the oven (*tone*).

Thus, based on the ceramic assemblage recovered from the destruction layers of the buildings, it appears that the two superimposed structures were not chronologically far apart and that both should be dated to the High Medieval period. Following the destruction of the earlier structure containing the *qvevri* and an *oven* (clay tandoor), the rounded-corner structure must have been constructed shortly thereafter. This latter building also seems to have been destroyed by the end of the High Medieval period. It cannot be excluded that future stages of excavation may refine or modify the proposed dating of these structures.

The architectural remains exposed within the trench were conserved in accordance with standard archaeological procedures.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Thus, as a result of the excavations carried out on the terrace west of Ateni Sioni, the following results were obtained:

a) Four burials belonging to the cemetery were partially cleaned and subsequently reburied and properly conserved.

b) Two stratigraphic sections were prepared, through which four construction phases of the terrace retaining wall were identified, including evidence for a second major construction level.

c) A test pit was excavated, demonstrating that the upper 2 m-thick layer of the terrace consists of sterile fill deposit, while the High Medieval archaeological deposits begin only from a depth of approximately 2 m.

d) Within the 20 sq. m excavation trench, five archaeological deposits (layers) were identified, two of which were represented by the remains of structures belonging to different periods. Both structures should be dated to the High Medieval period, indicating that shortly after the destruction of the earlier auxiliary building, a second rounded-corner structure was constructed directly upon its ruins. Only a small portion of both buildings was excavated, while the remaining parts continue into the unexcavated area.

Since the construction of infrastructural facilities is planned on the terrace, **it is essential that:**

1. The archaeological deposits revealed on the western part of the terrace be fully investigated archaeologically;
2. A stone retaining wall be constructed in order to protect the preserved part of the cemetery and the pathway leading up to the church;
3. Any works affecting the upper ground level of the terrace be conducted under archaeological supervision, while all groundworks deeper than 2 m must be preceded by archaeological excavations;
4. Given that the archaeological deposits exposed in the western part of the terrace are relatively well preserved, their proper conservation and integration into the new building as a museum exhibit, or alternatively, their preservation through another suitable engineering solution, is strongly recommended.